



OF

HOME

POEMS

NORTH:

MAURICE KENNY

3/30/77

BARBARA & Robin -

For the beds + the Beans
For the Love + the Joy
You have given me
+ the pleasure of your
companionship on our
TRAIL.

CNEN -

Barbara

NORTH

Poems of Home

by MAURICE KENNY

*For
Larry
Fred
Dick*

CHAPBOOK NUMBER FOUR *published by*
The Blue Cloud Quarterly, Marvin, South Dakota

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*"I am committed to the earth and the past; to tradition
and the future. I am committed to people and poetry."*

Maurice Kenny

FIRST RULE

stones must form a circle first not a wall
open so that it may expand
to take in new grass and hills
tall pines and a river
expand as sun on weeds, an elm, robins;
the prime importance is to circle stones
where footsteps are erased by winds
assured old men and wolves sleep
where children play games
catch snow flakes if they wish;
words cannot be spoken first

as summer turns spring
caterpillars into butterflies
new stones will be found for the circle;
it will ripple out a pool
grown from the touch
of a water-spider's wing;
words cannot be spoken first

that is the way to start
with stones forming a wide circle
marsh marigolds in bloom
hawks hunting mice
boys climbing hills
to sit under the sun to dream
of eagle wings and antelope;
words cannot be spoken first

THE TWINS

In The Beginning

For Carol Lee Sanchez

I came from my mother
the virgin daughter of Sky-woman
in love and with love

and sprouted from her armpit,
and left her flesh in the forest;

I am right-handed and I am left-handed;

I sing in the sun and sleep in the dark;

I plant corn and slay deer;

I seed poison ivy and mix herbs to heal;

I eat strawberries and skin weasels;

I feed the bear and with these hands
crush the rabbit to my chest,
and take honey from the flowers;

I mount geese and throttle ganders;

With these hands

I hold warm clay

and breathe on the fire

and break it apart;

I am west wind

and I am stone;

I challenge my left hand

and bend to my right;

I raise my right

and throw my left hand
off the rim of the world;

I shine now in the morning

and I shine now in the night;

I am alone

when I am not!

GOWANE
For Donna

Geese climbed the moon in the scent of wild grapes;
The great young elms arched in the autumn winds;
Chestnuts and walnuts plummeted to earth in the dark
Of the watchful night. No bird sang, nor wolf howled.
A young man smoked his sumac in the firelight.

In the distance a faint light shone on Hill Island. . .
The bleached-ones' camp. Flames shot through the night;
The thin tongues whipped through the dark like the tails
Of deer rushing through the thick brush of the woods.

He held watch for the Canarsee this night;
Watched for the bleached-ones to cross the waters
Where shad and sturgeon slept in the quiet of deep shadows.
All night he stood his post, wakeful, allowing neither eye
To close in sleep. The foolish strangers who had taken
The tip of Minna-atn, perhaps, were greedy.

He watched for the strangers and he watched for the Mohiks,
The wolf men, who sent their sachems for tribute
Of dried shellfish and shell beads, or the blood of his people.

He watched the geese fly against the moon
And listened to the deers' hushed tread;
He thought of the berries the women would pick in the meadows,
He thought of the elk the men hunted, he thought of the bear
That roamed his country. He watched for the strangers,
And wondered if they would stay in his land Menachawik.

At dawn the camp dogs came, and young girls for water;
His headman came, and spoke of his deed: the steady watch
Of the night. He announced to the village that henceforth
This young man would be called by the name Gowane
For he had kept the night's vigil, the village safe
From attack at the place of *little sleep*.
He proved the watchful one. Now he could go to his round house;
And once there he found his wife had a pot of hot fish soup;
And his deerskins warm and ready to receive him.

After eating, he rolled into the comfortable skins.
He felt proud and good in his strong heart
For he had been named Gowane, one of little sleep.
He had stood night sentry at the watchful place, Gowanus.

Fish swam nearby in the waters and a bear stood straight
To reach the high spray of the blackberry bush.
Again for another day the village was safe.

AKWESASNE

partridge drum in the land of the elm
Akwesasne
partridge drum in the land of white roots
Akwesasne

wampum
wampum is carried, the runner carries
the wampum
 for the still of the forest
 for the quiet of the valleys

wampum
partridge drum in the land of the elm

Dekanawidah broke arrows
 in the land of the elm
Akwesasne

morning raised clear and blue
as the sun poured into the mountain
the runner carried the wampum
from village to village, from sachem to sachem
in the land of the north
 the land of the elm
 where the partridge drum

the Wolf and the Bear and the Turtle
dance in the land of the Mohiks
the Deer and the Snipe and the Heron
dance in the land of the Seneca
the Beaver and Eagle dance in the land of the Onondaga
 in the land of the younger brothers
 Cayuga, Oneida

where the partridge drums
as the runner carries the wampum
from Dekanawidah to the sachems
in the land of the north and the elm
and the sky remained clear

Hiawatha spoke to Atotarho
where the partridge drums

one morning the sky burst red
like the early star that so often frightens
the hunter and the women taking water
one morning the sky burst red
and the arrows were fitted together
as the runner carried the wampum
from village to village, from sachem to sachem
in the land of the north and the elm
where the partridge drums

words spilled over hills, spread over cedar
rolled onto paper, folded for draws, weapons, for fat judges
who never heard the partridge drum
never heard Dekanawidah
nor saw him break the arrows
never spoke with Hiawatha
as he walked through the land of the elm
never heard Handsome Lake
nor saw him break the arrows
as he walked through the land of the elm
where the partridge drums
Akwasasne

rolled into paper, folded into draws,
weapons for fat judges
who never spoke with Dekanawidah
in the land of the north
in the land of the elm
where the strawberry ripens
under the sun, under the sky
blue and clear
by the running rivers of the valleys
where the partridge drums
the runner carries the wampum
Akwasasne

SWEETGRASS

For Jerome & Diane Rothenberg

Seeded in the mud on turtle's back
Greened in the breath of the west wind
Fingered by the children of the dawn
Arrowed to the morning sun
Blessed by the hawk and sparrow
Plucked by the many hands in the laughter
 of young girls and the art of old women

You hold the moments of the frost and the thaw
You hold the light of the star and the moon
You hold the darkness of the moist night
 and the music of the river and the drum
You are the antler of the deer
You are the watery fire of the trout
You are the dance of the morning
You are the grunts and the groans
 the whimpers and whistles of the forest

You are the blood of the feet
 and the balm for the wound
You are the flint and the spark
You are the child of the loins
 and the twin of the armpit
You are the rock of the field
 and the great pine of the mountain
You are the river that passes in the burnt afternoon
You are the light on the beak and the stump
 and the one-legged heron in the marsh
You are the elk in the snow
You are the groundhog and the bear
You are the claw of the muskrat

You are the ache in the spine
 yet the scent of summer
You are the plum and the squash and the gooseberry
 the flower of the bean
You are the bark of the house
You are the rainbow
 and the parched corn in your woven basket
You are the seed of my flesh
 and I am the flesh of your seed

HEAVY WINTER

For Peter Blue Cloud

stone spruce
glisten on moon meadows
of north country

winter steel
glaze trunk and branch
reflect the axe

stars mingle
within needles
points touch the snout
of the coy-dog on the hill

the near-by farmhouse
is dark and empty
the barn collapsed
the horse cold

BLACK RIVER

drowned in the pool of bullheads
caught in the power of blades
of paper mills and pleasure boats

mama wouldn't scale the fish
for the summer pan and the pain
in his stomach and the ache in his eye
when she threw them back in the river
black in the hard thoughts of men
black in the terror in its pools
that whirled the life of kids eager
for fish and the hardy slap of pop's hand
on the proud shoulder for having victored
the mighty prowess of the river, black
black in the night when only an arm surfaced
and his toys were given away, and clothes burnt

black river, Black River, I hear the groans
of your throat . . . these many years

HORSE

He told me not to ride him
but hills were green with summer
and trees were talking;
He told me not to ride him

he snorted, tail whishing in the breeze,
stomping hoofs in his own manure;
the post shivered and the ground,
and I froze in the morning chill

He told me not to ride him
but I was my own master, not even Dad
could scare me off with penalties;
He told me not to ride him

there were hickory nuts on the hill
an old cemetery under cedar
and a view of Black River valley
that only a horse could give

He told me not to ride him . . .
I wouldn't even listen to the horse . . .
He told me not to ride him . . .
he would tear out my gizzard on the wire fence,
but hills were green with summer
and the elms were talking

INTREPID

"The Indians of today . . . are hidden in the shadows of the past."
...Vine Deloria, Jr.

Holding this sun,
 walking
 through windows and doors,
I stand in the night.

Holding these ears of corn,
 broken
 from my legs,
My limbs lean against the moon.

Holding this eagle,
 hunted
 on mountains,
My power is clipped.

Sun
 I have known at the door,
 or parting fields of corn;

Sun
 I have held on my tongue
 and swallowed its fire;

Sun
 that moved rivers,
 warmed Geronimo,
 blinded hawks;

Sun
 which rose in the morning
 against the ancient lodge,
 crept into the sap and the bud
 of wild strawberries;

Sun

that gave name and face
to Sitting Bull and Red Jacket,
gave color to cockles . . .

Holding this sun,
I stand in the night
With the soldiers of Red Cloud,
And cannot find wind
To carry my name to the deer,
 the sparrow,
 the battle
That claimed my father's name,
 the knife
That severed our name from the body.

I stand in the night, the dark river,
Naked to afternoon, to autumn,
My feet on winter.

Holding this sun,
 walking
 through windows and doors,
 nestling
 in beaver fur,
 misting
 the dawn,
It is a stranger to my face.

PECKING ORDER

For Will

sparrow dead in the chicken yard

sparrow dead

sparrow dead

in the chicken yard

in the chicken

yard

sparrow dead in the chicken yard

plucked and red in the chicken yard

geese and ducks in the chicken yard

geese and ducks in the chicken yard

sparrow dead in the chicken yard

fed to the chickens in the chicken yard

fed to the geese

fed to the ducks

fed to the chickens in the chicken yard

sparrow dead

sparrow dead

red, red

farmer shot the sparrow dead in the chicken yard

a wild bird, a wild bird

the sparrow's dead in the chicken yard

shot to feed the chickens in the chicken yard

COLD CREEK

trout speckled in April dawn
slivered with silver of early spring . . .
song poured to the willows of daylight
over the sandy banks of the creek
cold to the toe, cold to the boy
caught like rainbow trout
by the hook in the jaw;
song poured to the grass, minnows
burnished in the leaping of noon
over and down the hills, quarried
and crushed in the fist of the pimple
that would claim me to manhood,
manhood shied like rats
in the haybarn seeking blood
not the hen's eggs mama said;
song poured to the flowing creek,
jumping rocks, staggering down dams,
thrusting weight against stones;
song poured to the winds
that bristled my cowlicks and burnt
goosepimples into the flesh of my thighs;
song poured into the night willows
with only shadows under

then words crept out like mice in the dark,
and Cold Creek, that had leaped from a hill
a spring, turned and entered the wide river
with my song

JOE

Joe signed himself in because of wine,
and stayed because his wife feared his fist . . .
clenched because there were walls to smash,
and doors of worlds that would not open . . .
only those of bars, gin mills, "buckets of blood."

He stayed and strolled among the bricks;
he whistled through the halls,
he laughed off home, Ward D
as if a fox that smelled escape,
or deer, wildcat that could jump the fence;
sure his wife's bed was cold
and would demand his blood and loins.

Joe got fooled, and knew it when they strapped
his brain, attached electric cords to his nerves,
and he shot upwards into crowds of stars.
Five rockets to the moon . . . he paled blue,
his eyes glued to walls; there was no heat
left to warm his wife's north country bed.

It was a simple solution, easily resolved;
the guards opened the door of Ward D.
While dressing for Sunday Mass, neckties
were given out; Joe wrapped his under the collar,
looped and tied, he pulled tight until
his laughing face turned cold and black . . .
his fist clenched to strike the open door.

Craftsman, Joe knew how to build walls . . .
he had turned many tubs of sand into cement.

IN NORTH COUNTRY GRAVEYARDS

My fingers in the earth . . . I could hear
they spoke but not to men
nor serpents sleeping in the grass . .
they spoke to blood and fingertips
to wind and deer leaping on the wind

My fingers in the earth . . . I could hear
like spider who led them from the dark
I took the withered hands
and approached this cross of roads:
a hawk sat under the circle of the sun
a straight arrow in its beak;
a field mouse lay by the hawk's talons
nibbling a fresh berry
green corn grew from its grey ear

My fingers in the earth . . . I could see
a wolf in the clearing of the woods
a bloody bone clenched between its jaws
a nest of pheasant feathers at its feet . . .
a wolf who had not roamed these hills
for a hundred years or more
had gone north into Canada with moose and bear
long before my mouth had touched my mother's breast
long before my grandmother wrapped her bones in grass

My fingers in the earth . . . I could hear
they spoke but not to men
nor serpents sliding in the grass
they spoke to blood and fingertips
to trilliums, sparrow fledglings in the elms

My fingers in the earth . . . I could see
I could hear !

OWL'S HEAD

Near Malone, N. Y.

For Rarihokwats

New moon on winter grass
snow on the northern moon;
the lead light of the kerosene lamp
drops through the window onto snow,
coy-dogs howl

the grey cat from Hogansberg
creeps through the dusty dark
seeking soft flesh of mice
nibbling postage stamps
in the lower draw of the desk

Reddog spits on the snow . . .
maybe he remembers
long ago Sitting Bull was murdered today;
in heavy boots, Dorothy
stirs soup, bakes biscuits;
Snowbird adds up the pains of the day

chored, Dorothy takes time out to laugh;
in her fear of mice, Snowbird brushes
away the night, the cat and goes to bed;
Reddog smokes and talks of Christians

I suggest they tie a rope
from the house-door to the pine
for in a blizzard they'd never
get back to the woodstove;
Dorothy smiles

mutely we say goodnight
climb the dark to ourselves;
the mountains say nothing.

HOME
For Rick

North

north by the star
hills under, cows, brush
river broken by spring
men broken by harvest and stone
fields and fields of stone
stone tall as a boy
boys tall as crabapple
spruce weighted with moonshine

north

north by the star
starlight that parts the corn
starlight that glimmers on autumn
squash and beans
apples caught by the frost
frosty women hanging clothes
balloon in the tight sharp air
pine-stove melts those figures, fingers

north

north by the star
old men smoke in a circle
north by the village
men smoke in a circle
over the feathers of a partridge
that drummed on the floor of the forest
deviled in the ambush of the wind

north

 north by the star
we go home, we go . . .
to the pheasant, woodchuck, muskrat
the last deer standing the summer
of flies on the blood of the wolf
howled in the north

 north by the star
starring the Adirondacks
forgotten in the rush for camp-sites
brown bear mussled to honey-
cookies tourist tease
to the crackling of their arms
and the butchery of the bear
who will not share the berry picking
with the girls of June this year
in the north, north

 by the north star
hills under, brush, cabins, towns
rivers broken by spring

we go home to the north

 north by the star

TWO

1

Raccoon
fishing the stream
stumbled
on a rainbow trout.

2

Fox
sucking grapes
lost the race
to turtle.

WILLOWS

Costumed in sleeves of snow;
framed, a woodcut of skaters,
muffled and capped,
flying down the frozen river.
Willows are strong in the wind!
I've never known one to break . . .!

I have known many children
with broken dolls and bent bugles
to enter willow shade to patch balloons . . .
safe at the creek edge where no one
would dare part the branches
in search of those tattered children.

Willows are strong in the wind!
I've never known one to break . . .

NORTH

In Memory of My Father

sun rises over mountain lakes
the fox breakfasts in the berry patch
mice tug grains into the burrow
grass has a way of growing

north by the old trail
north by the Susquehanna
north by the Freeway
north by the Alleghany or Mohawk
airlines that sweep you into north country,
deerland, Thousand Islands;
north by semis that scoop up the north
and wrap its aluminum soil about
your Thanksgiving turkey
and freeze your pudding in the refrigerator

north by any path would be north
north . . . by north star, northern
northern country of villages and cowpens
cheese factories and crabapples, trout
diseased elms and sick roots
fenced meadows slit by snowmobiles
sky cracked by television wires,
and hunters blizzard to cabins
by dead deer . . . the last kept
them abandoned in the north snow
from home in Staten Island

north of strawberry fields, milkweed
north of maples running sap to boil
north, north country, northern New York
where corn grew to the table and squash
and bean covered the valleys
north of strawberry fields, north of sumac
north of smoke, north of tomorrow, today
of yesterday that was and is and will be
for strawberries grow forever
and wolves will cross the frozen river
under the flight of geese

sun humps over hills and horses
muskrats in the stream
swimming to shore with a mouthful of mud
the bee sipping honey
minnows in the creek

grass has a way of growing
north, north along the old trail

guard the eastern gate

CONTENT

realize twilight

weeds

wings

stenciled

grass

twigs

fly-specks

penciled

shadows

where ends meet

LAND

1976

Torn, tattered, yet rugged
in the quick incline of bouldered hills,
crabappled, cragged, lightning-struck birch, cedar;
wilderness muzzled; forests . . . kitchen tables and bedposts
of foreign centuries; meadows cow-ed
beyond redemption, endurance, violated
by emigres feet, and vineyards alien
to indigenous squash and berry,
fragile lupine and iris of the pond;
even the rivers struggle to the sea
while wounded willows bend in the snow
blown north by the west wind

1820

spring lifts under drifts, saplings
hold to the breeze, larks sing, strawberries
crawl from under snow, woodchucks run
stone walls of new cemeteries and orchards;
apples blossom, thistle bloom

(Madame de Feriet's ghost prowls the miraged bridge
spanning Black River and her mansion lanterns
glow in the clear darkness of the French dream,
hazeled in the richness of her opulence

the lands she would hold out to tenants for rent
have neither clearings nor plows;
the disillusionment loried her trunks to France,
her mansion to ashes, her bridge to dust in 1871,
her savings to pittance, her dream to agony

Madame de Feriet gave her French aristocratic manner
to a sign post at the edge of the county road,
tangled now by yellow roses and purple vetch)

1976

April lifts from under the drifts of grey
snow piled by plows ruthless in their industrial
might to free roads and make passage
for trucks and automobiles to hurry to the grave
with dead horses in the far pasture
that no longer sustains the hunger of bleating lambs

virgin spring lifts, its muddy face scarred
and mapped with trails of progress, its smoke
rising in pine, maple, flowering aspen,
chicory weed and clods, manure of waste, whey,
abandoned farm houses and barns shaking in the wind . . .
like blind old men caught without a cane in the storm;
spring bloody in its virginity, its flow corrupted,
raped in zoned courts of law that struck quarried hills . . .
a great god's lance thrust in the quickness of electric sun

rage of spring rivers, swollen with anger . . .
cold voice growling through the night . . . swirling,
swallowing the soft shoulders of shoreline;
the rage of the aged shackled to history
and the crumbling bones of its frame, fisted against
the night, shaking the cane against the dark, the bats
fluttering in the balmy summer eve, fireflies creeping
through the young green grass of the long fresh meadows

1812

the north, the north aches in the bones, the land,
in the elms' limbs gently swinging in that August
breeze, bereft of holiday and festival, ghost and voice . . .
tunneled by gophers; ticks and fleas stuck to an old dog's back

(General Brown marched his men to Sacketts Harbor,
struck the British in the red belly
and went home to lift a pint to his deeds
and captured acres, to ville a town, erect a fence)

1976

the gooseberry is diseased, and the elm,
stone walls broken, sky cracked, pheasants
and young muskrats sterilized, and fields

TWO POEMS FOR MARY

I Bring Her Green Poems

Her glance falls upon the window,
the bouquet of anemones, colorful
as gypsy skirts or mountain meadows.

I have nothing to offer her but a poem;
what good is a poem imaged with crocus,
the flight of starlings and crows!

Her empty hazel eyes hold
neither fear nor recognition,
nor hint of the world beyond the window.

Hospitalized

Wrapped in a blizzard of sheets,
the carnation hunched behind the cup
of medication; shriveled like a slice of fruit
she worried: "A bad night to drive the road."
The Indian summer sun slanted
through the windowpane, nestled drowsy
at her feet like a favorite kitten.
Hypoed into a snooze, she woke later
angry the nurse hadn't taken care . . .
"Where's my comb? What will the doctor think!"
Then once again slid off the banks of snow
into daisy fields while sun
piled up in collision at the threshold;
the warm tight room convulsed with storm clouds.
The tiny voice cried from the snow bank . . .
"Oh! no. Oh! no . . ."

my many selves
 sat out
 the afternoon

sheltered
 in the window
while wind
 wove daisies
in the blizzard
 bracelets
on the elms

wind wove
 rosettes
on the hide of afternoon

at six
 I awoke
 to the evening news
and missed the snow
 the snow

mulleins are my arms

mulleins are my arms
and chicory
the sinew of my flesh;
May strawberries
are the blood of my legs
and the sun of summer;
maples are my head
and the sugar the sap of my tongue
that runs in the warm wind;
crocus are my eyes;
turtle the feet of my winter

seasons are a rumble of
herded old cows
coming to barn from pastures
before snow covers corn,
and the mare jumps the fence
crazy from glittering stones

marvelous is the miracle of spring
and, also, the weight of winter;
the plum which ripens,
drops seeds into pockets of earth
vacated by gophers;
the rabbits that sleep,
and the bear

incredible is the force of April,
and the lust of January;
in the summer of the second year
mulleins grow another branch,
chicory spreads to another field

Maurice Kenny lives in Brooklyn, New York where he co-edits *Contact II* with J. G. Gosciak and publishes Native American poets in his own Strawberry Press Series. His poetry is widely published in literary magazines and chapbooks. *NORTH: POEMS OF HOME* deals largely with his childhood in the Mohawk Nation and his friendships there. Some of the poems express his people's reverence for their land and the result of its invasion by outsiders from Colonial times to the present. Creation themes abound in symbol, story and cultural rememberings in which the animals and plants have their significance. In a word, this collection of poetry is about Maurice Kenny's home.

The cover illustration is by Mohawk artist, Rokwaho (Daniel Thompson) whose work frequently appears in *Akwesasne Notes*.



ALC 63
CAMERON

PRINTED

KENNY, MAURICE. NORTH: POEMS OF HOME.
(Cropbook no. 4, Blue Cloud Quarterly, South Dakota, 1977)
Inscribed by Kenny to "Barbara and Rubin"

2/12

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100-862-2222
2018

